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How we begin to remember

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How We Begin to Remember

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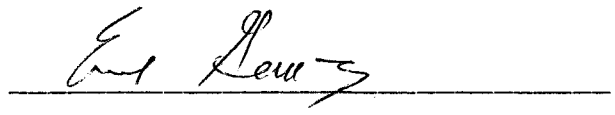

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Dear Abby

Grace wasn´t getting any younger. Her son, Robert, wasn´t getting any older. He was her youngest of four and he was coming home. Seven months ago she and Ed, her husband, had taken Robert to Boulder, to the State Mental Hospital, and settled him in a cottage with other Down´s Syndrome men. The thing Grace remembered about that day was how much Robert looked like his new roommates. He had never looked like his own family. When they drove away, Grace found some comfort in the fact that he finally looked in place.

This morning, three days until Christmas, Grace dressed slowly in the dark. Today she felt her fifty-eight years, her body seemed thick and faded. When she looked in the bathroom mirror she saw her mother. Thank God, she didn´t see her father. Her sister, Lillian, who was fat, looked like him. Every weekday she attended 8 o´clock mass with her mother, who was eighty-one and mean. Tuesdays she went to Altar Society, Wednesday she bowled with a group of women she liked, some Fridays she played Bingo at the church and every February she went on a week-long Retreat. Only Grace´s letters to "Dear Abby" were out of the ordinary in her life. Her letters and her son, Robert.

Everyone knew about her son, the town was so small, he was easily seen, always going up to people when she wasn´t

watching him, but no one knew about her letters. The first few letters weren't very good; her later ones were much better. Grace had written her first letter after an especially ugly argument, about Robert, with her mother. Nearly twenty years later she could see herself sitting at the kitchen table feeling a hateful rage, staring at the "Dear Abby" column in the paper. That night when the rest of the family was asleep, Grace wrote her first letter. She told "Dear Abby" about her mother's death in a terrible house fire. Grace's favorite part was a description of her own unselfish attempt to rescue her trapped mother. She had written:

> I tried over and over to get up the stairs to where my mother was sleeping. The flames were so hot that the paint was blistering on the walls. I wrapped up in a wet blanket and tried to get to her. The firemen arrived and forced me away from the house. I lost my beloved mother in that fire.
>
> Distraught Daughter

* * *

After mass Grace explained once more to her mother that Robert was coming home, was probably not going back, that Ed had gone to pick Robert up, and that Robert was not adjusting as they had all hoped. When she was angry the old woman drove with speed and fury. Grace sat rigidly still while her mother shouted and jabbed her old woman's finger in

Grace's upper arm, leaving a tiny dent in her heavy coat sleeve.

"You should've sent him to that place when he was younger. How many times did I tell you he needs special teachers . . . how many times, Gracie?" The Plymouth dodged around a parked postal van. Grace kept quiet. Arguing with her mother was mostly useless. In the Plymouth it was risky. "Lillian got help for Georgie when he couldn't do his numbers," the old woman continued. "Remember how that tutor came to the house afternoons? Well, Lillian did the right thing at the right time." Her mother hit the brakes for emphasis.

Grace remembered. Everyone had been so concerned that her nephew, Georgie, learn his numbers, but no one had been concerned about his lying and whining about everything.

"Did you tell Father about Robert?"

"It's not church business," Grace replied. "It's family."

"Now, Grace, Father cares about Robert," her mother said in that soothing voice that made Grace want to act crazy. "You should've told him the boy is coming home. What will he think seeing Robert in the pew with you and Ed on Christmas?"

"He'll think Robert is home," said Grace. "Mother . . . watch the parked cars."

Shortly after Robert was born the priest told Grace that God had chosen her to be Robert´s mother. "God chooses special women for his special children" were his exact words. For a year or two Grace had taken great comfort in those words. After that, she decided the priest was a fool. What with his vows and all, how could he even imagine to understand what being Robert´s mother was like? By the time Robert was six, Grace had concluded that God knew what he was doing, only the priest misunderstood.

Grace had bought Robert a new, portable radio. It was small, white, plastic, and she took it out of the box and slipped four new batteries in the nest in the back.

She had been so angry after the phone call from the director advising them to keep Robert home after Christmas, she had gone to the Religious Store and bought him two new posters for his walls. She intended to bribe him into going back to his cottage in Boulder with new things to hang up and show his friends. She bought a new deck of cards and a sweat shirt that said, <u>God Is Love</u>. The cards had the twelve apostles and members of the holy family on them.

Father used to give him Holy Cards after morning mass. The older boys taught him to play "Old Maid" using his Holy Cards. Robert had insisted on Jesus being the old maid. Lillian had caught them and told Grace what they were doing. She had hollered at the older boys, but let Robert keep his cards. He made up a kind of Solitaire and sat on his bed by

the hour laying down cards, saving Jesus for the last, always putting Him on the top of the last row.

Now, Grace wrapped the posters of the smiling Jesus and put them under the tree.

She didn't want him home. It was that simple. There had been years of child care before his birth when she was thirty-nine, it had gone on too long. Robert wasn't like her other three children. He didn't grow up. And she got tired. He was a sweet boy, the fault was not with Robert, it was with her. She had loved these last seven months. She was free to go and to stay as long as she liked or to stay home in the peace and quiet of her neat house. Grace did not want her life to be centered around Robert, not anymore.

* * *

As a young girl Grace had watched the housewives in her father's butcher shop. They had a purpose. She wanted to be like that, to have a home of her own, children to love and to keep clean. She longed to stride into church on Sundays and anchor her own little family in a pew. When Ed, who was the mailman for the downtown, began taking her to movies and dances at the Legion Hall, and actually proposed to her in the moonlight, and although he wanted to wait

until she was twenty-one to get married, Grace knew enough to push him into marrying her sooner.

* * *

In one of her letters to "Dear Abby," Grace had tried to talk about Robert. It was when he was seven and she had finally toilet trained him. She had every intention of writing about this feat, but when she had the paper in front of her she wrote a long, drawn-out letter about her "gifted" son and the problems she had with him.

> . . . he sits with his head bent over a book or a project and I watch him and wonder, where did he come from and how will I ever keep up with him? The problems I have with such a smart child seem endless. Where should I go to find help? I don't want to fail him.
>
> A mother

She did wonder where Robert had come from. What had she done to have a child like this? The doctor in Great Falls had gone over his diagrams and numbers with her but all she had come away with was that the fault was with her eggs. Grace couldn't forget that bit of information. It was with her every day, but she didn't talk about it or about Robert. Oh, once or twice Ed had carefully approached her; she was terrified she'd have to admit her guilt, her shame at having a child like that, so she brushed his clumsy, gentle probings aside.

The boy himself was not so easily brushed aside. Of her four children, Robert was the most loving. With the first two boys Grace had waited for them to warm to her, to cling to her with their soft, fat arms wrapped around her neck. Instead they had arched their little backs, climbed off her lap, and pushed her away. Her daughter, Theresa, wasn't any cuddlier as a child. Only Robert had loved Grace from the first. As an infant he would wake gently and grin at her as she came into his room. His baby smile made her feel the word mother deep in the small of her back. Nothing else ever caused Grace to moan softly as lifting Robert, sweet and damp from sleep, to nuzzle and nurse had.

* * *

Lillian was stuffing ice cream and packages of frozen french fries into Grace's freezer. "Ray is defrosting ours," she explained. Grace didn't doubt it. Ray did all the housework and the yard work and worked ten to twelve hours a day at the Duck Inn Motel while his business partner played cards. Lillian and Grace's father had died and left them adjoining lots of land that sloped down a weed-covered hillside. Their husbands had squeezed two houses on the inheritance and forced lawns to grow in narrow, walled-up rows. Lillian spent her time away from her job at the bank

dressed in one of her many Chinese robes, smoking, talking on the phone, or decorating cakes.

"Want us to come over tonight?" Lillian asked, fishing around in one of the deep pockets of her robe for her matches.

"Isn´t Ray working?"

"Me and Georgie, I meant."

"I was only going to have a sandwich. I have to finish my thumbprint cookies and decorate the Santas."

"I´ll help. What kind of sandwiches? I can bring a pack of bacon." Lillian was still digging through her many pockets. "Have you got a match anywhere in this house?" she asked.

"Not with Robert, you know that," Grace snapped.

"I´ll run back and get some. I will not stoop to sucking on the end of one of these over a stove burner," she declared before Grace offered her the use of the stove.

From the window Grace watched the pink dragon on her sister´s robe jiggle and roll as Lillian minced through the deep snow.

Once Grace had written a letter about Lillian. Well, not actually about Lillian, but about the tutor Lillian had hired for her son Georgie when he couldn´t get the hang of numbers. Late at night when Ed was asleep, Grace often took down the popcorn popper box from the top shelf in the pantry and read through her copies of the letters that had been

printed in the Tribune. The "tutor" letter or the "affair" letter, as she sometimes thought of it, was her favorite to re-read. The details of longing glances between herself, a middle-aged but still beautiful woman, and her young son's tutor never failed to thrill Grace. She had wisely not asked for advice in this letter, but had written only to share her feelings.

> He is a good and kind young man. He is so helpful with my young son. I suppose what we are doing is wrong in the eyes of God, but I need this man's love and I hope God can forgive me.
>
> Still Desirable

"Abby's" reply had sounded a lot like the priest's reply when a woman at Retreat had asked about God's opinion of her affair. "Abby" had nicely suggested that "Still Desirable" try to work things out within her marriage rather than outside of it. Same as the priest had said at Retreat.

"Have you got those Santas baked?" Lillian asked, slamming the back door against the drifting snow. "Let's get going on the frosting if you do."

There had never been a Christmas when Grace and her sister had not baked Santa-shaped cookies and frosted them with red and white frosting and covered his beard with short shreds of coconut. Their mother had brought the cookie cutters with her from the old country and each daughter had a set.

Lillian took a list from one of her pockets and pushed it across the table towards Grace. "Theresa called and gave me these names. She said you should call them on Monday, after Christmas."

Lillian lit a cigarette and moved to the drawer in the pantry where Grace kept her coconut. "He liked those swimming lessons, didn't he? Maybe he could go to another swimming class?"

"He loved swimming," said Grace, glancing at the list of names, "though there was a problem. He can swim where he is. He doesn't have to be home to swim."

Grace read part way down Theresa's list. She didn't have the energy for all of this. Years of putting on snowsuits, finding rubber boots, taking temperatures, trying to get her children to behave, especially Robert, had worn her out.

Over the years she had known another child like Robert. The Fuller boy. She had watched him in church when she and Ed were first married. His mother got old and gray as the boy sat next to her, year after year, Sunday after Sunday, acting up. His mother finally died and his brothers brought him to church. The brothers, just like the mother, got older, only the Fuller boy stayed the same.

"What kind of problem?" Lillian asked. She put the coconut and the red food coloring on the table and then settled herself in a chair. "You know Georgie hated swimming

lessons. The teacher was so mean to him, made him jump in too soon. I never believed in forcing a child."

"Robert´s teacher was okay," said Grace. She blended the red dot into the frosting, stirring until the whole bowl was red. "There was another kind of problem."

Lillian dipped her knife in the bowl of white frosting and spread it across Santa´s beard, her heavy perfume puffing from the deep folds of her robe as she reached, dipped, and spread. Not having the details drove Lillian crazy. Grace had learned to be secretive when they were children. But she couldn´t hold out against Lillian´s curiosity for long. The letters were Grace´s only secret.

It was painful for Grace to remember the swimming class. All of this was supposed to be behind her. She had made her decision and Ed had backed her up; now she was thinking about that damn Fuller boy again and worrying about the swimming incident. Grace broke a Santa in half.

Lillian added a dab of white to the top of several Santas´ caps and sprinkled more coconut across their beards. She had a neat row of six Santas in front of her, next to her ashtray.

"Tell me what he did in the swimming class," she demanded, lighting up another cigarette.

"It wasn´t anything, really," Grace lied.

"Tell me anyway." Lillian licked at the edge of her knife.

"You´ll blab it all over town."

"What a gossip you think I am. Tell me, it was years ago, how important can it be, Gracie?"

Grace looked at the cookies. Their beards bristled with tiny spokes of coconut, their plump cheeks were a jolly pink and their caps were a smart, crisp red. Lillian decorated a cookie better than anyone. Grace spoke slowly, not looking at her sister. "Well . . . he was taking his thing out. And the other kids would, you know, laugh, so he´d keep doing it."

"That´s nothing," said Lillian, blowing smoke from the side of her mouth. Grace could tell she liked the story so far. "They made him quit swimming lessons because of that?"

"No. There´s more." Grace wished she had never started this whole story.

"Good God, Grace, get on with it," Lillian shouted.

"All right, all right. He liked one teacher . . . a lot. He wanted her to teach him all the time. He started making his thing stiff and rubbing it against her. If she wasn´t teaching him he would swim over to where she was and start rubbing. Sometimes he´d sneak up on her, swim under water and surprise her. She told me I had to make him stop or he´d have to quit the lessons."

"Sounds like he learned to swim pretty good."

"Lillian, it wasn´t funny. What could I say to him?"

"Ed wouldn´t talk to him?" Lillian asked gently.

"Oh, it was easier to keep him home, you know. But he´d get his suit and roll it up in his towel and sit on the back steps all morning, waiting to go swimming. It broke my heart to see him sitting there."

"What are you going to do, Gracie?" Lillian asked, reaching across the merry Santas to take her sister´s hand. "Your heart breaking isn´t doing him any good."

* * *

The Santas hung from the mantel in a neat row; tiny red threads held them in place until the grandchildren arrived on Christmas Eve. There was one for everyone in the family, even the older boys who wouldn´t be home. Grace turned on the tree lights and the living room filled with magic. Lillian had gone home to get the bacon and Georgie. They would be back soon. Grace stood enjoying the quiet of the house at the front window. Outside the street lamps were on and a light snow was either falling or blowing from the drifts.

I am going to send him back to Boulder. Grace answered her sister´s question. I can´t keep Robert at home. Ed would be angry. He wouldn´t argue with her but he would deny her for days. That was his way. There would be no conversation, no comments on meals or the weather, no gossip from the Post Office, no chatting about her Bingo or her

bowling scores. The silence would be easy. Grace could not have the boy home again. She knew Ed wanted him there so he could drag his feet about retirement and their getting some pleasure from their freedom. He wanted the boy there because it would keep Grace home, keep both of them home. The two of them would get sick and then they'd die and Theresa would have to take Robert to church with her. Just like the Fuller boy. Enough, Grace thought, enough of this. After Christmas Robert goes back. Her mother, her priest, her husband all were so sure they knew what she should do. Like Lillian said, her heart breaking wasn't doing any good.

After dinner she would call Theresa. She would talk to her, then to Ed, and finally she'd tell her mother. Lillian would take her side, grateful because the problem had always been Grace's.

The glow from the tree lights blended with the blowing snow against the windows and walls of the house. Lovely smells still hung about the kitchen from the Christmas cookies. She didn't pull the shades in the kitchen as she usually did when fixing dinner; instead Grace sat at the old, gate-legged table and enjoyed the smells and the special light.

Her thoughts about Robert weren't so hard on her now. Her arguments were moving beyond her own needs to his needs. There were things he needed to learn if he was ever to live on his own away from her. She couldn't teach him these

things. He could learn them in Boulder. At least he could try.

Mothers give up their children. Grace had always understood that that was the way it was supposed to be. Children grow and leave. She had done her job and she had done a good job with all four of them. There was no one she could say these things to. There had never been anyone Grace felt comfortable talking to. In all these years she had tried or thought she had tried to reach her family, her priest, even her daughter, but she had failed. The letters had been her only way out. In her warm kitchen, with the smells of Christmas keeping her company, Grace slowly composed another letter to "Dear Abby":

> Dear Abby,
>
> I have a son, Robert. He is almost twenty years old and he is retarded. I am not sure if this is my fault or not, but for years I have assumed it was. I have loved and cared for my son and for my other children. My other children are grown with lives of their own, only Robert hasn't found a place in the world. I am getting older and so is my husband. I want to enjoy my life and I want Robert to be happy. I have always wanted Robert to be happy. He is in a Group Home and they are teaching him some skills. He wants to come home and live with us again. I do not want Robert to come home. Can you help me?
>
> Robert's mother

Grace read the letter over, moving her lips slightly as she read. Then she took out her good pen and nice stationery and copied it over. She folded it in thirds and placed

it in an envelope. She wrote the address of the Great Falls Tribune on the envelope and slipped it into her purse. She could drop it in the mailbox after mass in the morning.

White Meat

Susan was afraid of the meanness that had come on her like the fever of a low-grade infection. So she worked and saved, slightly distracted, watching for signs.

One of her jobs was to scoop raw hamburger mix, plop it on a scale, and then shape it into round, flat, 3-ounce patties. Her boss, George-the-Greek, spent a whole morning showing her how to pat the tendrils of fat and beef so the patties wouldn't shrink on the hot grill. Susan hated it. Keeping plastic bags on her hands, trying to ignore how slick they got.

She wanted to turn the radio on, but that would probably mean getting yelled at by Vi, who was settling her huge body in front of the spud-shredder. The woman was tricky, Susan never knew what would set off a blast of anger, so she scooped and patted in silence.

Dorothy, the third woman working in the Acropolis Drive-In, sat at the counter nursing a hangover.

"Here, this'll help." Susan handed Dorothy a counter rag filled with ice, glad of an excuse to be free of the sticky bags for a few minutes.

Dorothy took the ice and pressed it to her forehead. "You're a good kid, not like those two of mine." Dorothy struggled to light a cigarette with her left hand. "Let's hope for a slow one. I feel awful."

"Trouble?" Vi was swishing cut fries around in a ten-gallon container of cold water wedged tightly under the spud-shredder.

"You know how I get when I can´t make it over to see Roy," Dorothy whined. "And my kids make me crazy. Darla runs wild and is so mouthy, you wouldn´t believe the mouth on that kid and that makes Cheryl think she can sneak around ´til all hours. It makes me crazy. You know how it is." Dorothy groaned and shifted the ice to her other temple.

"It doesn´t do any good. Nothing does any good with kids that age." Vi stopped pressing the arm of the shredder for a minute to give Dorothy her full attention. "My Linda thought she knew it all at that age. Nothing is what she knew."

Susan had heard this conversation off and on all summer. It got rolled into the wind and the hum of the trucks out on the highway and the buzz and click of the grasshoppers against the windows. She listened, half-heartedly. They had sleazy kids. Not much she could say about that. Sometimes she thought about Dorothy and Vi away from the Drive-In. She imagined Dorothy visiting Roy in prison. She had overheard the two women talking about an area in the visitor´s room, a little hallway where the cigarette and Pepsi machines were, that guards couldn´t see. Couples took turn wedging themselves behind or next to those machines and screwed like crazy for a few minutes. Susan imagined

Dorothy and Roy, whom she'd never seen, going at it on top of the cigarette machine, Dorothy in her zip-front nylon uniform, unzipped, and Roy in one of those gray cover-all suits. Other times she tried to imagine Vi at home watching Cagney and Lacey; Vi loved Mary Beth and Harvey's marriage. But Susan didn't know. It was just a job.

"And she never learned," Vi continued. "Only good thing Linda ever did was leave that sweet baby boy with me while she runs after that part-time husband of hers." Vi stood up and shoved the bucket of fries across the floor towards the walk-in.

Susan poured herself a Coke. It was barely eleven and already hot up near the front windows. She looked out, her eyes moving slowly from the asphalt to the two-lane highway, across to the stockyards, finally coming to rest as everything did, in the sun-stunted stubble fields. Beyond that was the sky. Several times an hour Susan stood and looked at the heat waves, so solid that she could see them hang over, then ease down and mingle with the layers of drought-dry, powdery prairie.

The rest of the day, the rest of the week, the flat-out boredom of the job, the place, hung over her, easing down and mingling with the heat of her meanness.

It felt like years ago, the cold damp of a late May snow when she walked from the high school to the church with the other thirty-six graduates, trying hard not to ruin her

new shoes in the slush. She wasn´t pregnant and she wasn´t smart so she´d taken this job. After the first week she knew she´d have to get out. Her friend, Angie, told her about the Teacher´s College in Dillon, said anyone who had graduated from a Montana high school could go to college there if they had the tuition money. Susan had saved all of the first month´s wages and tips, sent the forms off and had been accepted for the fall. She didn´t want to be a teacher, only to be gone from this place.

"That Indian was here yesterday," Dorothy said, leaning over the counter to see what Susan was staring at.

"He bother you?" Vi demanded.

"Hah," Dorothy snorted. "No such luck. You know which one I mean? With the little girls, you know?"

"Aw. I miss all the good stuff. An Indian." Vi came to the front and took Susan´s stack of patties to put in the cooler.

Susan knew the Indian. She didn´t actually know him, his name or anything like that, but he was the only disturbance she had in her long afternoons alone. She watched Vi handle one of the patties. "He´s the one always orders, ´Three orange, no ice.´ Weird, huh?" She was willing to share that much about the Indian.

"Weird." Vi went over to where Dorothy continued to sit and took a drag off her cigarette, paying little attention to Susan.

The big woman didn´t like her. Said she was only summer help, putting in her time, counting her tips, making more work for Vi. A perfect 3-ounce pattie made no difference to Susan; the fun was in making Vi a little crazy each day.

"So what does this Indian look like?" Vi asked Dorothy.

"Hell, I don´t know. Tall, I guess." Dorothy groaned and asked Susan, "Get me an aspirin, will you?"

"Just a sec´." Susan pushed the heavy walk-in door of the cooler with her hip, trying not to drop the tray of patties.

"You´re going to screw up the latch doing that," Vi growled at her.

Susan handed Dorothy the aspirin, then went back to the cooler for tomatoes, slamming the door again with a quick bump and grind motion.

"He wears a hat, felt, not straw." She sliced tomatoes, one thick, one thin, ignoring Vi glaring at her. "And jeans, dirty jeans, and boots," she continued. "He looks like an Indian."

"They all do. They all do," muttered Vi.

Susan considered going on, describing the Indian´s little girls in their Goodwill dresses that rode above their knees, showing the torn ruffles of their underpants when they sat down in the dirt to drink their oranges, but she

didn´t want to share the Indian. He was like the meanness, welcome enough.

Besides, no one talked about Indians. They were there, along the fringe, in the shadows, best ignored. The Northern Cheyenne, the Assiniboin, the Blackfeet, the Chippewa Cree, names Susan said to herself, rolling the sounds under her breath like a chant. But the dusty reservation towns of Rocky Boy, Poplar, Harlem, Heart Butte, and Browning were said out loud, talked about constantly for their toughness, their ugliness. Tourists sometimes asked directions to the scruffy towns and once a film crew had come and filmed a Sun Dance Ceremony at Rocky Boy. Like the rest of the town, Susan shrugged and paid little attention. In high school, the great thing had been cruising Indian bars. The boys did it to get into fights and to brag, the girls did it for the getaway.

Susan could remember her heart thumping and her dry, tight throat, the cold, wet beer can in her hands, a car, usually one of the girls´ family sedans, driving around and around the small downtown, waiting for the dark that finally came on a long summer night. Six or seven of them laughing and shouting, "check the doors, lock the doors," circling and circling, finally turning off the main drag to the side streets. Slowly they made two or three passes down the streets. Feeling bolder, they would roll down a window a

little, enough to shout and tease the Indian men milling about the noisy, neon-lit street. White meat.

Suddenly one or two of the Indian men would start for the car, grab at the door handles, bang on the hood, peer in the window, their lips smacking and suggesting. Shrieking and squealing, "drive, drive," the girls, breathless with the idea, the possibility, would speed off. Susan had loved it.

* * *

Afternoons she worked alone. Outside the wind blew an occasional grasshopper against the window, click, it would hit, drop to the hot asphalt, stagger about, then hop or fly away. Susan watched for the Indian. Some days he came up from the river, other days he drifted down the hill. She thought he must live by the river. Perhaps in a house with a woman, a log house with low-set windows, and the woman short, fat like the woman named Mason who had worked for her mother, leaning in the doorway of the house the way the Indian women lounged in the doorways of the bars. One hip eased forward, smoking, watching the Indian man and the little girls come from town.

Behind this woman the house was rundown, a mess of food left on the table, dogs picking through the scraps on the floor. Susan played and replayed this scene in the afternoons while the hoppers buzzed and clicked.

Two cars pulled in the drive-through. Susan made ice cream cones, dipped them in waxy chocolate, rolled the already melting mess out to the waiting car. A second car followed with a fat man who ordered two grilled cheese and a chocolate malt. After that, it was quiet.

Her mind drifted easily back to the house by the river. She saw the messy room again. This time the woman was inside, somewhere in the room. The woman was on the bed in the corner. Two pillows rested between her back and the gray wall. The woman stirred the single blanket with her bare feet until it slid to the floor. Each time she moved a slight smell of snakes came from the bed. Susan had once had a boyfriend who loved rattlesnakes. They had gone to the bluffs above the river in early summer and looked for dens and skins. Deep holes in the earth smelling of thirty or forty snakes like old canvas tents in the middle of the day, with a half dozen or more sleeping bags unaired for the fourth day was a warm body smell that Susan liked to remember.

The Indian man stood in the doorway blocking the afternoon sun. He watched the woman. She made a small gesture, pushed her soiled dress above her thighs, tossed her dark hair, gently stroked her breast with one finger, watching the man. He hesitated in the doorway, turned and went out to where the little girls were playing with the dogs.

Once outside he stood still in the afternoon heat before walking towards the river, following the mid-August smell of coarse prairie grass gone lank, decaying along the muddy banks of the Milk River. He looked off to the Badlands at the gathering thunderheads shifting soft shadows across the coulees and washes. He stood still until the sun but not the heat was blanked out by the clouds, spoke softly to the little girls, went back to the house, closed the door . . .

The Coke man shoved the back door open, dragging a carbonation tank behind him. Susan jumped and shouted, "Jesus, can´t you knock or something?"

Susan hated him. He had a nasty habit of flicking his hard, close-set eyes over her body as if she had to please him. He explained about changing the tank and she held his gaze, daring him to drop his eyes even one inch. Just under his sketchy mustache he had a fresh pimple. Susan turned away first. She went to the sink to clean lettuce. She tore at the limp leaves, hating her job, this place, the Coke man, her father, her mother, Dorothy for whining, Vi for picking on her, the radio for playing stupid Don William´s songs, and the Indian woman in the snake-smelling shack. Shit.

Finishing the lettuce, she looked around for something to keep her from answering the Coke man´s questions. The

Indian stood in the narrow shadow of the building near the drive-through.

"Excuse me," Susan said to the Coke man who was crouching behind the dispenser in front of the window. "I have to get to him." The Coke man leaned back on his heels and glanced over his shoulder, clearly not believing her.

"Why don´t he go around?"

"He always comes to the window." She waited. A fine prickling inched up to the back of her head the way it did when her dad dribbled his dinner. The anger she woke up with each morning flared, she felt light-headed, as if she had stood suddenly after being in bed for days.

"Move, you asshole," she hissed.

The Coke man moved. Susan pushed the window open; a new swarm of flies rushed past her. The Indian rested his hand on the extended tray, leaned and gave her his order. "Three orange, no ice," he said. Her anger mingled with the other feeling she had to have in the hot afternoons. The feeling she got when she saw the Indian´s hand slip the dress down the woman´s arms, off of her breasts, his brown back bare and warm.

The cups were heavy and the air damp, close; she moved like a swimmer underwater to the cash register and back to the Indian. For a minute she thought, a spell, but as she counted his change she was caught, what she felt was her own doing, the Indian hardly saw her.

"The chief´s a good customer, eh?" The Coke man pushed past her and crouched down behind the dispenser again.

Tuesday morning, when Susan got to work, Dorothy was alone dipping pieces of chicken and drinking beer.

"Where´s Vi?" Susan asked, switching on the radio.

"Didn´t show up," Dorothy shrugged. "Maybe she had trouble with the truck."

"Want me to shred fries?" Susan asked.

"Get them started. I need a cigarette." Dorothy settled on her stool and exhaled noisily through her bucked teeth. "I think I should move over to Deer Lodge. Maybe get a job at the 4B´s near the interstate. Jesus, the hassle of driving back and forth and my kids, maybe I should move."

"How long ´til Roy gets out?" Susan angled a fat spud between the metal teeth of the shredder and pulled down hard. Nothing. She lifted the arm; the potato was still balanced there. Bent. She took it out and put a smaller one in its place.

"Three years. Christ."

"Who´d he rob anyway?" The second bent spud slipped from the teeth and plopped to the floor. Susan picked it up and rubbed it off on the back of her jeans. She put it back in the shredder.

"Here, move over, let me do those." Dorothy pushed Susan away from the arm. "You´re bending the hell out of them."

They worked without saying much the rest of the morning. Now and then a truck accelerated at the base of the hill, a calf bawled in the stockyards, and the wind blew papers and hoppers against the front window.

Vi showed up late the next morning. Bruises were pressed along her thick upper arms like grease stains on a paper towel. From where Susan was working she could hear Vi´s deep voice rumbling like a thunderhead. Dorothy´s high-pitched "shit" and "bastard" broke across the rumbling like short stabs of lightning.

Vi turned and hollered at Susan. Susan ignored the big woman, enjoying the excitement and the eye. It was swollen shut.

Friday they had a huge order to get ready for the Farmer´s State Bank Picnic. The three women worked with a steady rhythm. It was hot and by midafternoon there was grease everywhere, coating the air they were breathing.

"Christ! This is awful. This is im-fucking-possible without a cold beer. I´m going to the Bowling Alley," Dorothy announced.

Susan waited on cars while Vi muttered and finished the chicken order for the bank. Dorothy returned with a cold six-pack about an hour later. She was standing in front of the frier grinning when Susan pushed through the back door, her arms full of dirty trays. Dorothy sacked an order and steadied herself with her free hand.

"This here is for your Indian friend." She waved the sack in front of Susan. "Give him a holler."

Susan had no choice. She snatched the bag and went to the door to motion the Indian inside. "One word from you two . . .," she hissed. The Indian stood on the other side of the counter and waited for his change.

Outside the little girls tagged along beside him as the Indian walked to a sagging station wagon. Susan rushed over to the door to watch him. She looked past him to the car.

In the car was a woman. The woman in the cabin, but not the woman she had imagined, this wasn´t her woman, imagined by a bored white girl in the hot afternoons. This was his woman.

She was young, young and graceful. With wide silver bracelets on her brown arms. Susan opened the screen door and stood in the wind. She needed to see the woman.

It was in the bathroom of Buttreys Store, in the basement, in the Boy´s Department. Susan had gone in on a winter afternoon and struggled with her heavy coat and thick tights, finally getting stripped down and on the toilet. It had been stuffy with the usual public restroom smell of disinfectant made worse by the steam pipes across the ceiling. She had thought she was alone, but when she came out of the stall there was an Indian girl, about fifteen or sixteen, combing her hair in front of the mirror. Susan decided against washing her hands; she´d have to ask the girl to

move or she´d have to wait; she didn´t want to do either. She walked instead to the door and grabbed the handle. She was part way out when the Indian girl turned and snarled, "My ass is just as white as yours."

She could smell that bathroom smell as she watched the Indian take a chicken wing from the basket of food and wrap it carefully in a napkin. He held it like a child, way out in front, as he moved to the side of the car where the woman sat. Susan watched the woman slowly bring a pint to her mouth and drink. The Indian handed the wing to the woman, helped the little girls crawl into the back seat, shut the door behind them and started around the front of the car. He glanced at Susan standing in the wind.

From inside Vi shouted something at her but she wasn´t finished looking at the Indian woman. It had been easy, all summer, maybe all her life, whispering the little vows. No way was she going to pretend like her mother, or get pregnant and live on the salary of a Coke man. Never drag to work, get drunk, get beat up, put up with sleaze, sleazy life, sleazy kids. She knew it, knew it all.

And still she´d been fooled. She had fooled herself, lied, floated on the surface.

Cars were pulling in from the highway, Susan´s hair was whipping all over the place, the Indian woman was looking at her. She was so beautiful, she belonged in this windy, flat, dry place. She had to be looked at and seen. We were

safe, Susan thought. We didn´t need locked doors. It was always a game.

The anger that had kept her company all summer was slipping away from her, the meanness, her only friend, the only thing she had trusted, the only thing that had been hers was slipping with the anger. She would have nothing. She couldn´t let it go, she had to have something.

She jerked the screen door against the wind. "Did you see that?" she shouted to Dorothy and Vi. Not waiting for an answer she went on shouting, "He gave her a wing, a lousy little wing and he´s eating all the good stuff."

"He probably bought her that pint. What do you want?" Vi asked in a quiet, cold voice.

"Shit," Susan stopped. She´d never have what she wanted. She had made it all up, gotten it all wrong. The Indian woman was beautiful.

Pawing around in the nearest bucket full of chicken she came up with a thick breast. She wrapped it in a napkin, just the way the Indian had wrapped the wing. At the door she turned and said to the two women watching her, "I want that Indian woman," her voice cracked, she swallowed and went on, ". . . to have a big piece of chicken." Dorothy and Vi were too shot to laugh at her.

Out in the wind, across the lot, scared, but moving, the meanness was back, it felt good, she marched to the sagging car. Susan barely stopped, thrust the chicken

breast through the window, turned and marched back across the lot as if she had been practicing this moment for days.

She heard a horn honk, a paper bag blew against her leg, a car door opened behind her, creaking. It was hot, she hadn´t noticed how hot the afternoon was. She turned her head away from the blowing, hot wind and caught sight of the Indian woman.

Susan stopped. She watched the woman as she stepped away from the open car door, raised her arm over her dark head and threw the chicken breast, hard, shouting, "You´re so fucking white!"

Susan ducked.

How We Begin to Remember

I couldn't remember a summer when Agnes Pretty Weasel didn't walk in the alleys. She would come with the easy days of early summer in her soft, worn leggings, held in place by strips of tanned hide. Around the waist of her print dress, under her loose hanging breasts, she had more animal hide tanned to a near white and beaded in deep blues and reds.

Up and down the alleys she walked, taking what we white people had thrown away. On Sunday nights my mother would carefully wrap one or two wrinkled, baked potatoes, the end of a slab of bacon, bruised apples and the odd handful of cookies or a square of cake that had begun to crumble along the edges. My job was to place this parcel of food, wrapped in the Sunday Funnies, inside our garbage can in the alley, out of reach of the after-dark dogs, but perched on top of the real garbage so that Agnes could reach it without rummaging in our smelly, slick waste.

Agnes was different from the other Indians I watched. She never sat around Buttreys Store waiting for her grown children to finish in the grocery or the bars; she was always alone and she was tall and straight. In my small circle of friends everyone knew Agnes. The boys teased her and followed after her when they had nothing better to do. The women in our neighborhood held to their own small

rituals of leaving food and clothes for Agnes. Our only Protestant friend, Mrs. Snyder, put her things for Agnes in shoe boxes tied up with string. She recommended this method to my mother, but we stuck to our Sunday Funnies. I don't think my mother trusted that Agnes would leave the empty shoe boxes from one week to the next.

Only one person knew Agnes well, my grandmother, Nellie Sullivan. She knew the names of Agnes's sons and whenever a Pretty Weasel was arrested she would inform us of his relationship to Agnes, nephew or son or grandson. As my mother said, Grandma Nellie kept track.

Midsummer when the sun dried the dirt in the alleys to a fine powder, I noticed Agnes was gone. One day I missed the squeak, squeak of the beat-up child's wagon Agnes pulled up and down the dusty tracks framed by our garbage cans and back fences. The sound and the sight of Agnes moving slowly from garbage can to garbage can was as much a part of my backyard world as the drone of wasps drifting from hollyhock blossom to blossom.

When the squeak didn't come for two weeks I got scared. It was as if the garbage cans had disappeared or the Episcopal Church at the far end of the alley was suddenly gone, leaving a plot of well-watered green lawn blank. Something I needed, a piece of order I invented every morning in the alley, far from my mother's naps and my father's secret sip-

ping, had slipped from its place. I noticed she was gone but I said nothing, just watched and worried.

Because I had never seen anyone look inside the cans and check to see if Agnes had taken their offerings, she wasn't missed at first and I kept my vigil alone.

It was late July and our house teemed with summer rites. Canning jars and huge, steaming pots took over our tiny kitchen and my mother acted impatient and cross. In a climate as cold and stark as ours along the edge of the Northeastern Montana border, food was harvested and hoarded for the long winters when the wind battered us and the snow piled up for five months. Food was important; food was pleasure. In the long winter Agnes disappeared. She went home to Rocky Boy and waited for the spring when the metal lids of the garbage cans would lift off easily in her hands.

I didn't carry bundles for Agnes to the garbage in the winter. In the fall my mother would go through our outgrown or worn clothes and make piles to drop off at the church. The priest distributed these clothes to needy families on the Reservation when he went to say Mass on Sundays.

Before Thanksgiving the Church Altar Society gave the names of Indian families who needed food baskets and warm clothes to concerned members of the parish. My mother was always concerned. So every year we packed a food basket and my mother over-dressed both of us for the short ride to the Reservation. It would be dark when we started out, just

before supper, in the late, cold afternoon. I sat next to my mother with the food basket between us. We didn´t sing or say the Rosary; it wasn´t an outing. In the basket there was a turkey and jars of pickles with sprigs of dill floating like little, lost palm trees; spiced peaches; apple butter; homemade cranberry relish with orange rind; green pepper relish; and a quart jar of garlicky tomato sauce. My mother told me she would never give anyone a basket of food that contained beans and rice or flour and sugar. She would arrange the jars of preserves and condiments from our basement in a big wicker basket and declare, "Food should be pretty and have a bit of scald on it."

When we arrived on the Reservation I was in charge of finding the right house. I had directions on a slip of paper the priest had written. The houses didn´t have street numbers and the road never became a series of streets. The priest´s map included details like kind of dog or pickup in front of the house or number of houses from the corner or curve in the road.

As my mother drove our Ford slowly along the frozen ruts, I peered out the window hoping to see Agnes Pretty Weasel. I would pretend that she didn´t live in one of the flimsy houses with the tiny, high-up windows and the ugly siding, but that she lived in a lodge made of massive logs. Inside I imagined her moving gracefully in front of a deep, open fireplace while shadows danced on the rough walls that

were hung with animal skins. I clung to this myth while the reality of greenbelt-designed houses that fell apart after two long winters got caught in our headlights like road-kill on blacktop.

Finally, after shouting at me and ripping the paper from my hand to read it herself, my mother would find the right house. A skinny dog, stiff from the cold, barked and circled our car. Leaving the motor running, the basket awkwardly fitted over the sleeve of her beaver coat, my mother would pick her way across the frozen ground, determined to do the right thing. Perfectly turned out with leather gloves and ankle-high boots with a ruffle of fur around the top, she would stand at the unprotected doorway and knock.

The priest patiently tried to explain to the women who took baskets to the Reservation that they should pull up in front of the house and wait for a member of the family to come out. That was the way on the Reservation. My mother would repeat these instructions to me as we drove across the empty plains with the winter moon slipping over the horn of Saddle Butte and following our path. And every year she would pull up in front of the Indian´s house and wait for about thirty seconds. Then she´d stub out her cigarette in the ashtray and declare that this was sheer nonsense and why couldn´t they behave like decent people. Then off she´d go to the front door.

I sat numb with terror while she did this, sure she was breaking some ageless taboo and I would be punished for her actions. I watched her from the front seat of the warm car and when the door opened, framing her in light from inside the house, I was terrified the arm that reached out for the basket would grab my mother and pull her inside, leaving me to sit in the car alone until the gas was gone and I froze to death, a stiff, little body in a heavy wool coat, hat, mittens and lined boots, in the front seat, dead.

With the moon high in the clear night sky we drove back home, singing Christmas carols, the empty basket between us, the air in the car a lovely combination of smoke, wool, my mother´s hand cream and a leftover bit of spicy smell from the jars of food that were right that moment being examined and tasted by an Indian family, maybe part of Agnes Pretty Weasel´s family.

Relief spread across the seat to me from my mother, not unlike the feeling we shared on Saturday afternoons after a good confession or when my father came for dinner on time.

After the second Monday came and went with no sign of Agnes in my alley, I decided to go to Grandma Nellie and find out what she knew about Agnes´s disappearance.

When I announced I was going to Grandma´s house without an invitation or an obvious reason, my mother raised one eyebrow but didn´t ask any questions. Crates of Washington

peaches were piled up waiting for her to tie back her hair and turn up the radio in our hot kitchen.

Grandma Nellie and my mother put up with one another. I could always tell when Grandma called on the phone; my mother's voice would get flat and she would hold on to her replies, stingy in her concern or comfort for the old woman.

When I was five my mother went away for a year. No one told me why she went to Tacoma, Washington; I had to make do with the phrase, "she needs a long rest." Since then she had gone for several weeks at a time and the same reason was given. As a result I had learned to stand back from her, to ask little of her, to make my own world and to pretend to a carefree happiness because she had the power to go away.

I went to Grandma Nellie when I needed some continuity, a pattern, a flow to my small world. Before her legs got bad, swollen and too thick at the ankles for her shoes, we would do her errands together on foot. She never mailed a payment, but took the money to the right office and got a receipt on the spot. She trusted the Postal Service but had no faith in gum-chewing high school graduates who worked in the accounting departments. While I waited for her hand-written receipts, I admired the working girls with their pretty, bright clothes and noisy gum.

When we ran errands we used the alleys to get to town. The only interesting part of a neighborhood, she declared each time we set out together. Together, my grandmother in

her second-best, blue serge dress with the jacket and lace collar and I in a cotton dress with a sash and too-tight, short sleeves that my mother had starched, went down the alleys in the quiet of the early morning. We went at a steady pace, commenting on flower gardens, the state of hedges and fences and lawns. Bits of gossip and a snort from my grandmother told me who was quality and who was not.

This is where I first met Agnes Pretty Weasel. The two women met in the alleys regularly all summer. They would leap into a conversation as if they talked every other day, the way my mother talked on the phone to her sister. I was referred to as "the one I like" by my grandmother. The two of them discussed my father and Agnes's sons, my grandmother's legs, remedies for the swelling, the weather, their gardens and things from a long time ago. Sometimes Agnes got angry with my grandmother for not taking her advice or her herbal bundles. Other days Grandma Nellie would shake her fist at Agnes and warn her that one of her renegade sons would be the end of her.

In Grandma Nellie's kitchen I took comfort in the sour smell that was part old-lady-living-alone and part Johnson's Paste Wax. It was always the same smell and I found comfort in that. Before marrying my grandfather at what she described as the almost-too-late-age of thirty-five, she had been a school teacher, first at Fort Assiniboin and later at the Devlin School. She was the first woman to become school

principal and served for years on the school board. My mother often referred to her as a no-nonsense kind of woman. She had had her own money when she married and she invested it with a group of doctors in local real estate. I often went with her when she collected her rents. Except for Lee's Tavern, I had been inside all of her properties with her.

When we had deposited the rent money and gotten a receipt, she would take me to the Owl Drug and we would sit at the counter with the businessmen having afternoon coffee. We drank Coke floats and chatted with everyone. On the way home she would tell me, "Your daddy'll be coming by now that there's money in the bank." She was right. My father would take me with him and he would sit on the wine-colored sofa and sip his coffee--grandma didn't allow whiskey in the house--and act as sweet and loving as a good son should for about a half-hour, then he'd get mad and start shouting. Grandma would shout back and then he'd hustle me out of there, leaving a tiny nest of half-finished drawings and cookies on her kitchen table.

"How is Momma?" she asked, slipping her glasses down her nose with a squinting motion in order to peer at me.

"Doing the peaches. This weekend we are going to Mr. Saki's for cukes and dill," I answered.

"She's doing too much, not resting." She made a clucking noise with her tongue and shook her head.

"She rests, every afternoon," I told her, hoping this would end any talk about my mother. I had come to talk about Agnes. My mother was too powerful a subject. Her illness, unnamed and never talked about, held absolute sway over my life. She could disappear at any time. As long as she was in the house, at the stove, resting in her room, it was enough. I made it enough because it looked normal. Agnes was important at that point because she had nothing to do with my mother or her illness. I was safe fretting and worrying over Agnes.

We had lunch, the odd assortment of leftovers and pickled vegetables my grandmother loved. I waited. Living with my mother and father had taught me to be careful, to wait for signs, to measure what I needed with the risk involved in getting it.

"Throw that out," grandmother ordered, pointing to the last of some macaroni salad in a glass bowl. This was the time to ask about Agnes.

"I´ve been putting our stuff out for Agnes but she hasn´t come for it," I said casually, scraping salad into a garbage sack.

"You probably missed her. She gets around early when it´s so hot."

"No," I pushed on, "the stuff is still there. I check every day."

She looked up from doing the few dishes we had dirtied. "You dig through the garbage? Your mother doesn´t know that." I ignored her comment and asked, "Where do you think Agnes is?"

She dried her hands on the hem of her apron and went to the screen door that looked out on her back lawn and garden. "Well, it´s summer so she could have gone to the Dances or maybe the Crow Fair. She has people on the Crow; she married a Crow, Pretty Weasel, her second marriage after Stiff Arm died." She turned back into the kitchen, took the dish rag and wiped down the table.

"You think she´s okay, not hurt or sick?" I asked. I wanted her absolute assurance about Agnes.

"Well, I can´t say if she is or if she isn´t, can I?" She looked at me the way the nuns did at school.

When I left to go swimming she told me to keep a sharp eye peeled and to let her know when Agnes showed up in our alley again.

By the second week of August I could swim the length of the pool under water and do a back flip off the low board and Agnes had been gone from our alley for five weeks. Margaret Mary Devlin came for drinks and dinner on Sunday. I had checked out her alley several mornings with no luck. I thought perhaps Agnes had tired of our offerings and was taking her business elsewhere the way my mother changed butchers every month.

In the past week I had taken to roaming alleys way beyond my own neighborhood but I had seen no sign of Agnes. I was feeling frantic. When I dressed in the dark, damp locker room at the pool, I checked the little furrow between my brows; it was deepening.

Margaret Mary Devlin sipped her second old-fashioned and, as if in answer to my many prayers, asked, "Has anyone seen the old Indian woman, Agnes, who goes through the garbage in the alleys?"

None of the adults answered. Margaret Mary continued, "Mother went out and stood in the hot sun waiting for her this week and last, but she never came. We had bath towels and some pork we weren´t all that sure of for her." I sat with my Denny Ryan in a sugar-dipped glass and said nothing. I wasn´t about to share Agnes with these grown-ups.

"Maybe she´s on vacation, or something," my mother quipped, crossing her long, tan legs as the others all laughed.

That night my mother went about wrapping some grapefruit and a couple of cans of Spam, a half-loaf of raisin bread and two of my father´s old sports shirts in the Sunday Funnies when my father came in the kitchen and made fun of her. "Jesus, Jean, what´re you doing? The old girl is probably off on a bender. Dump that stuff."

Later, in the dark kitchen, I fished the food and the shirts out of the garbage can under the sink. I found the

Funnies on the back porch with the other papers and I wrapped the food in them. I folded my father's shirts on top. They smelled of sweat and lemon. I held the pale yellow one up to my face and sucked in the smell my mother tried so hard to scrub out with lemon juice.

Outside, the yard was flat and dark. I moved along the path to the sidewalk that ran alongside the quonset hut Mr. Korzack, our neighbor, used for his cars. It was dark. A car moved slowly along Fourth Avenue. I heard a dog bark somewhere down the alley. I hurried between the buildings, my bundle held in both hands. In the alley I lifted the lid slowly, afraid of making any kind of noise that would alert the roaming dogs. Agnes wasn't important at that moment in the dark alley, only the continuation, the flow, the ritual. Setting the lid back on the can, I pressed it down with the heel of my hand in several places. Back in bed, I listened to the dogs and then I slept.

When I returned to Grandma Nellie's full of the news that Agnes had been missed by Margaret Mary Devlin, she listened. We sat across from one another at the kitchen table, a plate of lemon bars between us. I ate and Grandma took her glasses off and put them back on several times. As I finished the last bar she said, "She is dead. Agnes is dead; I know it." I sat very still. No one said much about death to me. "First Edith Broadwater, then Carrie Nelson last spring, your other grandmother, Ella Young, Mrs. Broad-

water; my friends are all dead." She looked at me with a blank, gone-away look and I knew she didn't see me sitting there in my shorts and bathing suit.

I thought I should get her something. Everyone at my house took a drink or a pill or at least lit a cigarette when they felt scared or upset. She was always happy when she had her Accounts book out so I went to the shelf and took it down and put it on the table in front of her. Then I got us both a 7-Up and some ice.

Beginning with a year she described as "before the war," she talked about coming to teach at Fort Assiniboin. Looking over my head she talked and rested her hand on her Accounts book.

She had come west from a women's college in New Hampshire to teach school. There were Indian children in her classroom. She hadn't expected them. They didn't speak English; they sat straight in their desks, their moccasins barely brushing the dusty wood floor. After Christmas she went to the Major, asked him to find her an Indian woman who could speak English to help her. It was her job, her passion, to teach children, all of them.

Agnes came to the classroom the next week. It was a cold winter and the Indians couldn't hunt; they were living on government rations. Agnes was very thin, as were most of the children; they didn't have warm coats or wool mittens and caps. Grandma knit next to the wood stove all winter.

At lunch time she showed Agnes how to make caps and mittens.

Agnes had been sent to the Ursuline Sisters in Great Falls for training and was a great help in the classroom according to Grandma. As she explained the lessons in English, Agnes would sit with the Indian children and softly explain what was being taught in Cree.

The two of them went on like this for five years. Agnes married John Stiff Arm; she still came to the Fort to teach every day. When she had her first baby she gave him two names, an Indian name and an English one; she called him Corbett Stiff Arm, Corbett for Grandma's family name. He was a lovely baby and in the summer he came with the women when they picked wild raspberries and dug horseradish along the Milk River.

Then the Fort closed and Grandma came to town to teach. There were no Indian children in the town school and she didn't see Agnes for a long time. One afternoon, with the smell of newly-opened lilac bushes filling her classroom, Grandma sat at her desk correcting spelling papers. She looked up and Agnes was standing in the doorway. The baby, Corbett Stiff Arm, had died of measles the winter before and Agnes had come to tell Grandma. Agnes wouldn't sit down or stay for a cup of tea. She came to tell about her son's death and then she turned and left. Grandma wore a black arm band for the dead baby and the other teachers whispered about her while she mourned.

Agnes came to say goodbye when she married her second husband, Pretty Weasel, and moved with him to the Crow. Grandma had learned that the Indian way to show friendship and respect was to give a gift. She gave Agnes her Star quilt that her sisters had made as a wedding gift and Agnes gave Grandma a Quill bag. Grandma said, "We were friends," and then she said no more.

The room had turned hot. I had missed the first half of afternoon swimming. I wanted to be in the water. I got up to go. Grandma didn't seem to notice.

In the dressing room I sat on the hard bench in my wet suit and thought about how my mother said children were a lot of trouble, needing things, asking questions all the time. I stood up and stared at the furrow between my brows. She was wrong; the adults in my world were a lot of trouble. Either they told me nothing or, as in the story of Agnes, too much, more than I could sift through.

I was invited to the Bear Paw Mountains for a week and Grandma went off to Malta to take the mud cure at the Hot Springs. While in the Bear Paws I was never alone. Images of young women surprised me at odd moments. One was dark and the other light, with pale, red hair. I would be playing an elaborate game in the loft or swimming in the dark, cold bend of Beaver Creek or waiting for deer in the high meadow grass when suddenly the tall grasses and the

tips of spruces would be gone and the two women would float, their hair and skirts whipping in the wind, in front of me.

At night, in my sleeping bag, I would watch the night sky and begin to remember Agnes´s story. I had wanted Grandma to tell me what to expect, to prepare me with the facts. If Agnes was gone, dead, I wanted to know for sure so I could feel the sadness and then pass on to the next part of my life without her. Instead I had been given Agnes´s story; it was in my keeping.

* * *

"I´m better. Nearly cured," Grandma announced, stepping down from the noon train. She looked better. Her legs were only fat, the ankles had lost their terrible thickness, and her black, nun-like shoes were laced tight on her feet. I was frantic to talk about Agnes. To me she was very much alive. I had kept my vigil in the alley. Images of Agnes floated above the flat, dry, dirt-packed alleys and the cool, blue water of the swimming pool. She was everywhere.

But Grandma was fretting about her pickles. My mother assured her we would make sure she got to the County Fair the day her pickles would be judged. I sat on the front steps listening to their voices. My mother promised I would take Grandma to the fair and spend the evening with her.

"Only Indian kids have to take their grandmothers to the fair," I whined when my mother told me I would be taking Grandma Nellie to the fair and spending the day with her. I was angry at Grandma because she didn´t care about Agnes. "People will think I am a half-breed," I threatened my mother.

"Nonsense. There is not an Indian child in the state of Montana with such blue eyes and a lovely new outfit bought special for the fair." The argument ended there.

* * *

It was hot inside the display buildings and I had to find a folding chair for Grandma. I wandered among quilts and sweaters knit with giant deer and John Deere tractors in tight, tiny stitches of heavy, wear-forever yarn across the back. I felt bored and surly. Grandma was in her element. Women milled around fanning themselves with race schedules and coupon books. They stopped at the tables to fondle, examine, criticize and compare one another´s colorful efforts.

Grandma held her ribbons for her corn relish and bread ´n´ butter pickles on her wide lap. She talked to everyone and her conversation made a circle from her ribbons to her health, to her family, to recent deaths and funeral services, to a moment of silence and then back to her ribbons.

I stood around waiting but no one mentioned Agnes Pretty Weasel.

"Run along. Enjoy the rides, find your friends," she ordered in front of three ladies from church. I had no choice but to wander outside. I moped around the edge of the midway among the mysterious ropes and cables that lay tangled like sunning snakes among the weeds along the fence. At twelve I was aware that there was one kind of horrible social disgrace in being seen with my grandmother at the fair and another kind, a nastier kind of disgrace in being seen all alone. So I kept to the fringe.

In the late afternoon sun the midway was an ugly jumble of faded stalls and shabby prizes. Chipped paint, rusty and dwarfed merry-go-round ponies, and burned-out colored lights caught my eye. I looked beyond all this to the horse barns and livestock pens and to the clear, blue sky beyond the bluffs. Below the blue and beyond the horse barns were the Indians.

Tipis the color of the dust hanging in the still air were clustered on the bluff's edge above the town. They were as shabby as the midway but they blended with the few trees and the wild, tall grasses, and I found them soothing to look at.

Leaning against a gate in the fence I swayed slightly and watched the camp. Small children ran in and out, men leaned against pick-ups drinking beer, and the women bent

down to enter the flaps in the tipis. I watched the women, even the ones in jeans and western shirts, trying to find something, a familiar gesture or movement that I could recognize as Agnes´s. The sun started to set behind Baldy. I gave up for the moment.

Grandma knew where to eat at the fair. We went to the BPOE for dinner because they served fryers, not stewing hens cut up to fool a person. Then on to Job´s Daughters for pie. I had two pieces and Grandma had one with ice cream.

"Now let´s see some sights and walk off this dinner," she commanded, either unaware of or ignoring my foot-dragging.

In the twilight the crowd appeared as one huge, jiggling body wrapped in a brightly striped shawl. It surged forward and fell back in a rhythmic undulation. We walked slowly as if clinging to the last row of its fringe.

I could smell the livestock as we neared the center of the Midway. "The Indians are camped on the bluff, past the horse barns," I told her. "Do you think Agnes is with them?" I asked boldly. She didn´t answer or she didn´t hear me, I wasn´t sure. I asked again if she thought Agnes was in the camp.

She turned to face me. Two men stepped around her. "Agnes is dead," she answered.

"But, Grandma, maybe she isn´t. Maybe she went away, to the Crow, like you said at first, and now she´s back." I

tried to convince her for both of us. "We could go over there and ask about her," I suggested. I had never seen white people near the dancing but I figured my grandmother was brave enough to do it. She faced down lying, cheating renters and my father´s bullying. I thought she should be able to walk across the field with me and ask about Agnes.

"Leave it be," she said to me. "Agnes is gone, leave it. I´ve done my mourning for her in my own way and now it´s done." Two small boys darted in front of her and I reached out to steady her. Taking my arm in hers she told me, "Now you began by remembering."

Goodnight Irene played as if from a music box being turned by a tired hand and loud voices and laughter surged up and died away around us. Carney hawkers teased and begged the crowd. A baby cried somewhere. As we neared the ferris wheel I suddenly felt the drums from the camp. My throat hummed, the edge of my scalp crawled with each vibration that rang out from the stretched, taut hides. I wished hard, let me understand the drums. If I could they might tell me about Agnes. I listened, but I could only feel them.

Grandma paid for our tickets and we got in the ferris wheel line. The chair rocked as we sat down. I scrunched in my corner, giving her most of the seat. She sat upright, her big black handbag placed squarely under her folded hands on her wide lap. The man snapped the safety bar in place

with a casual shove, stepped off the ramp and pulled the lever. We moved slowly backwards into the dark sky.

I looked down on the faded tents strung with strings of colored lights as the swaying chairs chugged up in an arc. The carnival was small and it sat on a small plot of prairie. Past the town the railroad yard blazed with harsh light. The rest of my known world was draped in a flat, endless darkness.

The chair lurched and I clutched Grandma's hand. The ferris wheel came to a grinding stop. We were nearly to the top of the arc. Careful not to rock the chair, I pointed out the tipis and the fire in the center of the Indian camp.

"They're celebrating," Grandma said over the music that played on even though the wheel had stopped. I watched as the figures moved in a flowing rhythm like the Milk River rounding a bend after spring runoff. The ritual circling was slow and measured in contrast to the push and shove of the crowds below the suspended chair.

"I know Agnes is there, with the dancers," I said to Grandma. I peered through the night, sure of my eyes and my memory. I had seen Agnes all summer, first in the alley and then in the floating images. I saw her as an old woman and as a young woman. She was part of my days and my nights. If Agnes was in the circle of dancers, I would recognize her.

"Agnes is dead," Grandma said as if answering the response in Mass. "I want her back. We were friends, young women together. She is my past and now I need to remember her."

The chair tipped as the machine started up again. We moved to the top of the arc and I looked down at the dancers, did not move my eyes from them. Agnes was there. I had only to look long and hard enough, I would see her. As we crested the top and were carried up and over in a forward motion, I saw her. A tall, straight figure holding a bunch of feathers in her hands, a shawl or blanket folded over her arm, danced apart from the circle of gently swaying women.

The dark sky closed slowly in on the dancers like a curtain dropping in a puppet theatre. The fading figures met the flash of colored lights that ringed the top of the carnival for an instant, then the Indians were gone. The crowds blurred and re-formed into faces and bodies as the chair rocked on its hinges and then stopped. I could smell mustard and burnt sugar, the music played on and the drums throbbed as I held the chair steady for my grandmother.

Where We Come From

Carl was a man who watched the weather. In his years as a newspaper man he'd written about it often, both in news stories and in his editorials. Today, he looked out his kitchen window and studied his lilac bushes. The buds were popping out on every branch. Part of him was excited to have flowers so early in May but after forty some years in Montana, all of his adult life, he didn't imagine his bushes full of fragrant blossoms; instead he could picture the boughs bent to the ground, broken by a late spring blizzard. He peered closely at the buds but in his mind he saw the delicate, pink and lavender blossoms crushed beneath imagined snow.

Maybe he'd write this month's editorial using some of his news clippings from past weather stories. He could describe this strange, early onset of summer-like weather and what it meant to the community, the gardeners and the surrounding area's farmers and ranchers. He was sure there had been other early summers. It would all be in his files. After lunch he'd dig out the clippings.

Marge, his wife, taught English at the Community College and his children were grown and gone to lives Carl was both proud and envious of. He cleared his dishes from breakfast and tidied up the bathroom. Domestic chores had

become his domain since he´d retired from the paper although he still wrote his monthly editorial.

Most mornings he read. He subscribed to a dozen or more papers. The bigger ones, The Times, The Seattle P.I., The Washington Post, took him the whole week to carefully read and clip. Carl poured a second cup of coffee, turned the heat down under the pot, grabbed a handful of cookies and the Seattle paper and went to sit on the patio.

On his way he checked the thermometer on the side of the house, 76 degrees. Before he settled at the table, he scanned the sky. A thick, harmless bank of cumulus clouds hung on the northwest horizon and a few wisps that could be jet trail from the base in Great Falls streaked the wide blue stretch over the Bear Paw Mountains. Other than that it was wide open and clear. This sky was what had convinced him to take the job on The Dailey News.

He´d been raised in Idaho and been to school in Oregon, had worked on a couple of small papers in those states when he´d read about the job opening in Montana. He and Marge had just been married and she was working on her thesis. She told him to go and check out the job and the town. He had stepped off the noon train in early September in ´46 and the sky had taken his breath away. It went on forever.

He had stood on the platform with the noise and smell of trains all around him and he had felt as free as he had ever felt. Back home he´d tried to describe the moment to

Marge. He had finally used the word "emancipation" to explain the sense of possibility he had experienced that day. As he stood in the early autumn sun his mind had reached for the expanse his eyes saw. Even now when Carl looked up at that span of sky he felt the invitation to open himself, to stand taller and to breathe deeper.

After stretching and breathing Carl settled into his lawn chair and pulled the center section from the paper. Christ, the thickest section of the paper was glossy junk, Arts and Entertainment. He glanced at the cover picture as he set it down on the table. COYOTE GOES TO TOWN. The red letters ran along the bottom, under the picture, on the cover of the magazine. Carl took a minute to study the picture of the painting. He moved the paper out of the glare of the sun. A stylized coyote looked back at him. It stood under a neon sign, upright in tight levis and hand-tooled boots. A heavy, turquoise belt buckle divided the animal in half. Fringe and scattered sequins edged the shirt and vest. A pair of Ray-Ban glasses perched on its head between its peaked ears.

Jesus, Carl muttered. The picture touched a nerve, a raw nerve deep inside him. He didn't like it. In fact, the feeling the picture touched on threatened him. Still he sat very straight and looked at it.

Then he saw the name, Marvin Windy Boy. No way it could be one of them. He turned to the article and read it.

Hell if it wasn't. The inside photo showed a young Indian leaning casually against a wall in what looked to be an artist's studio. Paintings hung on the walls and canvases were propped about his feet.

I'll be damned, Carl said out loud as he read the words, Rocky Boy Reservation. Slowly he began to remember something he'd heard in the newsroom about some Indian kid who could paint. He couldn't get a hold of the memory, but there was something.

The article praised the young painter and his work. It was full of words Carl hated; innovative, clear statement, ethnic-purity, words he always red lined when he was editor of his paper.

He read on. The kid had gotten out, left the reservation, gone to Art School and made a name for himself in the Southwest.

After dinner that night he showed the article to Marge.

"Look at this piece in the P.I.," he said, handing it to her. She glanced at the cover and then turned to the article. She read, adjusting the little half-glasses Carl thought made her look like Joan Rivers.

"Nice. Do you know him?" she asked. "I think I had his sister or cousin in a class several years ago. I remember the name but not the face."

"No, I don't know him," Carl snapped, not meaning to be so short with her. She glanced over her glasses at him and

handed the article back. "Put it in your files, probably come in handy one of these days."

Carl remained in a foul mood for the next two days. He muttered and burned things on the stove and was shorter than usual with Marge. It was the damned article and the picture of that coyote. It was Indians. They made Carl mad as hell.

He worked in his garden at the end of the week. The dirt under his knees and his hands soothed him. The sun remained high in a clear sky and it warmed his back as he dug and weeded in his flower beds. He stood in the evening half-light with the hose and watered his plants. But back in the house he was haunted by old images and buried memories.

It was his skin color. Carl had fought against it all of his life. He had been born in Cuba. His father had worked for the Red Cross in Havana. When Carl was eleven the family had emigrated to the United States, to Pocatello, Idaho. He was so dark, stuck in the middle of all those white faces in school. And he had an accent. He spoke English in a slow halting fashion, picking his way carefully through the rough, plain, flat-sounding words. But he had learned and he had lost his accent. His skin color stayed the same.

Only one of his children had dark skin. Jenny his daughter would come home from school crying about the teas-

ing and the ugly taunts. He had done for her what he had done for himself. Always be the best, he taught her. Carl was perfectly dressed, his friends joked and called him a "dandy." They could afford to be sloppy, he couldn´t. His daughter excelled in everything. But for Carl this was painful because he knew why she had to try so hard and why she had to succeed. Her success, like his own, was not sweet.

For her and for himself the memories faded and receded but the sound of children´s voices chanting, "Injun, Injun, Injun," the waitresses who were never sure if they should serve him, and the store clerks who followed him from counter to counter, stayed in place like a shadow on his brain. All it took was an article like the one in the P.I. and the shadow grew large once again.

The Indians knew he was white. Going to and from the paper he´d pass them lounging against the wall of the Coast to Coast Store. Somedays they´d panhandle him. "Got a buck mister?" They knew he wasn´t Indian.

In all the years he´d been part of the town he´d tried to be fair. The new Junior High back in the early ´60s had been the first time he´d tackled the issue of Indians on the editorial page. The only way the town could raise the money to build the facility was to include the Indian kids from Rocky Boy. If they bused them in to the school and provided

a hot lunch and access to the new gym, the federal government would fund the project.

Carl was no lover of the federal government but in this case he´d written a long editorial in favor of the plan. He´d pushed for assimilation, getting those young kids off the reservation and into the mainstream. Let them see how to live, how to make it in the white man´s world. He´d suggested host families for the winter months when the roads would drift over. He had proposed after and before school coaching for sports. Some of those kids were born to play basketball.

The whole thing passed. The kids came in on the bus in early September, many with braids and not speaking English. Before Thanksgiving there was trouble. The staff insisted upon English in the classroom and the lunchroom. The Indian kids stuck to their old ways. They weren´t learning and they weren´t eating. Hell, the whole issue had been pushed through because the town had promised the government that the Indians would learn and get off commodities.

There were meetings and some of the tribal elders tried to explain their way of thinking but in the end the bus would arrive in the mornings with fewer and fewer kids until none came at all.

It made things easier for Jenny at school. She stood out as Carl had done but at least she wasn´t lumped into a group because of her dark skin.

And Carl had been in favor of the Ski Run the tribe wanted to build in the Bear Paws. Hell, he'd gone out on a limb for them that time too. He fully understood the need for jobs and development and he was willing to lend his support. But they bungled it.

Nothing got done on time and money was missing. The imported lifts sat silent. He'd gone out to look for himself one day in March. The stilled machinery cast long shadows across the cleared strips of mountainside and the wind blew against the cables and pulleys causing them to creak and groan in the cold. Carl had stood at the base of the slope, the cold going through his heavy, wool topcoat to the marrow of his bones. It was this cold beneath his anger that he felt looking at the painting of the insolent coyote.

The damn picture was nagging at him. Marge told him to sit down and write out whatever was eating at him. He didn't know what exactly was eating at him. He hated the picture of the coyote and yet he kept it on his desk.

Finally it rained. Everyone was relieved. The wheat needed the moisture and the grasses began to stand tall and lush in the lower Bear Paws. Carl cut his first crop of rhubarb and baked a pie. He called Jenny and talked to his youngest grandchild on the phone. He made love to Marge and bought himself a new pair of golf slacks.

The third cool, damp day he sat down at his Smith-Corona and wrote his editorial. He called the town's atten-

tion to Marvin Windy Boy and to the article in the P.I. He quoted the article; he praised the young Indian painter; he cited other Indians who had made a name in the arts; he encouraged the tribe to point to Marvin as a positive role model for young people of the tribe.

Leaning back in his chair he read what he'd written so far. He stirred his coffee and took the last bite of pie. He felt good. The old anger had stopped boiling. Marvin Windy Boy was a good painter, he could be a source of pride to his people, and Carl could be generous in print.

He got up to wash his hands. The piece wasn't finished. It needed a strong ending. He had set himself on a path and had followed that path in a good, straight line. The path didn't trouble him; it was the destination.

He sat back down and stared at the keyboard. An old friend, it was so familiar. Then he typed. "What was the problem on the Reservation? What was it that prevented other young men and women from high achievements? Why was a young Indian like Marvin Windy Boy the exception? Where were the other painters and writers and lawyers and dentists and school teachers? He had asked himself these questions over and over and he wanted an answer. He was tired of old excuses, laziness, loss of land, loss of identity, looming problems of alcoholism and drug abuse. Other races like the Chinese and the recent immigrants from

Asia had assimilated, learned the ways of the dominant society. Why won't the Indian do the same?"

"What do you think?" he asked Marge over lunch the next day.

"Who are you asking?" she answered.

He ladled more soup in her bowl and replaced the saucepan on the stove. "My readers, the elders, anyone," he declared, taking his seat opposite her.

"The elders don't read the paper, you know that, so they can't answer you." She finished her soup, complimented him on his editorial and left him alone with his thoughts.

The editorial ran on Friday in its usual place on the second page with his picture in the top right-hand corner. He stood around the press room and talked with his former employees and then went to lunch. Several people stopped him to comment on his piece; all of them agreed with him. He walked home thinking that was the end of it.

The dreams started that night. The smirking coyote leaned against Carl's back fence and held out its paw to him. Carl tried to work around the lounging figure but it asked for money, or it howled in the night and Carl had to go out in the yard and try to quiet it. The coyote didn't speak English but Carl understood it. At times it taunted him, jeered at him, smirked at him and sometimes it just watched him.

When he awoke from one of the dreams he would stare into the greyness around him and re-assemble the dream. He wasn´t afraid. The coyote didn´t frighten Carl but it posed a threat. It came, uninvited, into his dreams, into his yard, where he found peace and quiet and it threatened all that Carl held dear. And yet Carl did not go to bed at night fearful or unwilling to dream. He went to sleep hoping it would come.

* * *

August Windy Boy stood in his kitchen in his green Tribal Police shirt waiting for his wife. They were going to his daughter´s house to celebrate his grandson´s baptism. He had moved cattle all week and was now working the weekend shift on patrol. He planned on taking a couple of hours off to join his family. He could spend the afternoon leaning against the car in case a call came in over the radio. Besides, it was Sunday and things were pretty quiet on the Reservation.

He had not gone to church for the actual baptism. Gus was not a believer, that was his wife Loretta´s business and she did it real well. Loretta and the priest were a team.

The back door was open so he could hear the radio. He was getting too old to sit in the damn car all day. A

sweet breeze blew in and carried the sounds of birds and dogs and the horses in the corral at the end of the road.

He watched the priest´s car drive up to the side of the house. Loretta got out and Gus waved at the priest. Gus stayed in the doorway as Loretta worked in the kitchen. She moved in light, fluid, graceful steps despite her size. Gus watched her arrange warm pieces of chicken in a roasting pan and wrap towels around it to keep in the heat. Her hands were always doing, tending, soothing, comforting. Gus saw her as the heart of his people. And she was saintly; Gus accepted that about her. Close to her God, she lived deep inside her religion.

"How did it go at the church?" Gus asked.

"Father did a beautiful job. You should´ve come."

"Naw. You and him, this was your day."

"Don´t start with me, Gus," she said, taking a quick look around the kitchen before motioning for him to go out the door.

In the car Gus adjusted his gun. He had never learned the trick of getting in behind the wheel without pinning the damn thing under him. Loretta smoothed the skirt on her best dress and watched him struggle. She snapped his seat belt in for him and he backed the car away from the house.

Loretta talked about the service and the baby. Gus scanned the sky as he drove. A hawk circled slowly above the

school yard. Gophers must be out, Gus thought. It had been hot all of May and the smaller animals had stayed in their tunnels. The council had met last week and decided to move the herd up into the high ground a month early. Then it had rained and the withered, dry clumps of wild grass had filled out, turned a good green, and Gus noted that his friends and neighbors settled down. The water in the creek was high and fast. Gus slowed down as he drove across the bridge in order to listen to the soothing sound of water moving over and against the rocks.

Pickups formed a half circle around the house at the end of the gravel. "Good crowd," Gus said to Loretta, knowing how important it was to her that her friends come and celebrate.

There had been hard feelings between Loretta and their daughter Cheryl. When Cheryl married Larry and moved off the Reservation, she turned her back on her mother. Larry was as Indian as Loretta was Catholic. Cheryl quit going to church and began to learn the old ways of the tribe. Gus tried to stay out of it, but they all knew he was on the girl´s side. He always took her side. He had loved her in ways he never loved his sons. Just watching her, the way she ran to meet him when she was little, the quiet that kept her company when she worked, all these things had touched Gus and stayed with him.

Gus had never been around a small girl until his daughter was born. He had been taken from the Reservation, from his grandmother´s house, and sent to Boarding School in Sioux Falls. Once there he had had his braids cut and had learned the white man´s ways and language. He lived in a dormitory with other Indian boys and he never saw young girls.

His English was good. He could talk and joke with the white men at the stockyard in Havre and the ranchers around Box Elder. He could smooth things over with old man Cowan, who owned the store in town, when there was trouble with the young men. It was the old ways Gus had had to learn. After years of drifting around the relocation centers and bars of Minneapolis, he had walked back onto the Reservation. A few of the elders remembered him and showed him his grandmother´s grave. He never learned to speak his language again.

Cheryl hugged him hard. "Next week we´ll have the naming, everything is ready," she told him softly. He smiled and squeezed her hand. It was good to have peace in the family again. Baptizing the baby had been Larry´s idea and Loretta had cried and forgiven her daughter for leaving the priest´s church.

Under the clear sky the bottle passed from his son-in-law to Gus and then to Billy Eagle. Gus was officially on duty but it was a special day and he felt good. The wind

had come up and it held the scent of warm earth and budding plants. It was gentle and soothing and Gus let it settle around him as he leaned against the fender of the Tribal Police car.

He liked Larry. He worked hard for young Cowan, was good with the cows and had a generous spirit. When he wanted to marry Cheryl he had come to Gus and told him, "I don't get G.A. or commodities." Gus played along and demanded, "What do you have then?" With a straight face Larry answered, "A job." Gus smiled, remembering the day.

The talk moved from cows to the weather and to summer celebrations. Gus listened and looked off past the house and the outbuildings to the Bear Paws. The cows were there now, most of the snow was gone and sweet, young shoots were pushing up from the damp, thawed ground.

He had been against selling the east side of the mountain to the Ski Run folks. Not because it was ancestral land because it wasn't. His tribe, such as it was, was a crisscrossing of several wandering bands left over from Joseph's march and other defeated tribes hiding out in Canada. This land had been given to them by Congress and they had been rounded up and resettled here. The spirits that rested in the mountains were not ancestors.

Gus had come to believe in the power of the land in the same way the white man believed in it. The land was their future, not their past. He had argued for owning the

land, just as the white man owned his land, but the tribe was hungry, the people needed cash, wanted to buy things, so they had sold the section of land. Trapping and hunting privileges had been retained but the animals soon tired of the noisy skiers in their bright clothes and they moved from the east side.

Gus wasn´t a good trapper, he´d learned too late. Still he went to the mountains and walked the streams looking for signs. He set his traps and checked them regularly but the beaver hid from him and he had no luck.

The priest came out of the house and Loretta and the other women followed with the food. The others gathered around the table and Loretta motioned for silence. She bowed her head and the others did the same. Gus stood off by the car and watched his wife pray and the priest bless the food and offer thanks to his God for the weather, the food, and the beautiful baby boy whose soul now belonged to Jesus. Cheryl looked over at him and he smiled and nodded at her. Next week the baby would get his Indian name and after that Gus figured his soul would be his own business. He didn´t argue this point with Loretta; it was best left unsaid.

Loretta brought him a plate of food and a cup of coffee.

"Don´t stand here and gossip all day. Come and sit with the rest of us," she fussed at him.

"I got to get back to work as soon as I eat," he said, but he followed her back to the table and sat down across from the priest.

"Gus, you should try this potato salad," the priest said, pointing to the yellow mound on his plate with his plastic fork. "This is what I call genuine potato salad."

"None for me, Father," Gus said and patted his belly.

Jesus, potatoes, he hated them. That woman at the Boarding School had fed them potatoes morning, noon and night. At first he hadn´t known the words to use to ask for food and he had ached with hunger. On his cot, alone in the big room while the others ate, he could smell the food. When the ache turned sharp and stabbed at him, he learned what the woman said he must know. He learned all the English words and he learned them real good. And he ate potatoes. He lived in fear of the pain of hunger. At his and Loretta´s house, they ate rice or noodles.

The whiskey and the food made Gus sleepy. He´d like nothing more than to go in and stretch out on Cheryl and Larry´s bed but the radio in the car squawked; he leaned in through the open window and answered.

There were cows on the Bear Paw Road. A white girl had stopped at the Box Elder store and reported a couple of calves with the tribe´s brand on them wandering loose. He´d have to go and check it out.

He kissed Cheryl, shook hands with the priest, took one last pull on Larry´s bottle and looked in on his sleeping grandson before he climbed into the car, adjusted his gun and took off.

They´d weaned the calves too soon. He´d been concerned about this but they had to move them to get to the grass. Now the calves were confused and he´d be chasing them for the next two weeks. The last drink of whiskey made him careless and he over-corrected the car on the curve near the bridge.

The air was cooling off as he turned towards the lower slopes. A sharp smell of pine came in through the window as he left Cowan´s land and passed the "Entering the Rocky Boy Reservation" sign. Late last fall he´d been up in this section of the trees to cut firewood. His oldest son, Wayne, had been with him. Now he was somewhere in Great Falls, drunk. He´d been drunk somewhere for the last ten years.

But as he drove and watched for the calves Gus could see the boy as he had been, playing center court. He was tall and fast and he loved basketball. The boy had been a good kid but something went wrong. Gus didn´t talk about it with Loretta. He kept the blame he felt to himself. With Wayne it had always been hard, maybe because he was the first. Gus hadn´t known how to be a father, he hadn´t had a father, only the Boarding School, and that hadn´t

taught him anything about love. That year the boy spent in Havre at the Junior High School had been real hard on him. Gus had seen it. Instead of going to the boy and helping him, Gus had stood back licking the wounds of his own painful memories.

That last day had been a good one. They had cut two cords of firewood and loaded it on the truck. Wayne had worked hard beside him. At the end of the day they had sat on the bumper, glad for the cold wind that was blowing down from Canada. Wayne had a pint of Jack Daniels and they shared the last of it and smoked. Wayne looked up at the expanse of sky with the clouds closing in on them and then at Gus for a long minute before he said, "I love this place and it is killing me." Gus had understood and they drove the twelve miles home in silence.

Gus slowed down and looked from side to side, trying to see the calves. Maybe the white man was right, put up fences. Jesus, there was nothing Gus hated so much as stringing fence. He´d done it when money was scarce and old man Cowan was hiring, but he´d hated it. That and picking rock, two jobs no one should have to do.

A small white-faced calf appeared above the barrow pit. Gus pulled the car off the road and parked on the wrong side. He got out and walked down the incline and then back up to where two calves were now watching him. He continued past them to a small stand of cottonwoods. He

peed with his back to the wind and the road. What he should do is move them back in the timber, get them away from the road for the night. It was near sunset and they should be away from the traffic tonight. He could radio back and have a couple of men ready to come up here on horses in the morning. There were probably more strays around and the job would be better done on horses.

Whistling and calling softly to the calves, he nudged and slapped them alongside their tails. Here we go, let´s move, up here, c´mon, he ran the phrases together with clicking and whooping sounds. They stared at him with their round, blank eyes, then moved off in the direction he was aiming them.

* * *

"The real joy in living in a place a long time is seeing your memories all around you," Carl remarked to Marge. The drive up Beaver Creek Road had brought back the sounds and smells of picnics, the children splashing in the bend of the creek as he and Marge sat on a blanket in the shade.

There was a lot of traffic on the road until they got past Kiwanis Camp. It had thinned out as they crossed onto the Reservation so Carl had decided to make the loop and come back to town through Rocky Boy.

He and Marge talked of picnics and gatherings from years ago, long car rides in the dark with the kids asleep in the back seat. Carl was enjoying the day. It was beautiful, clear and warm, the sun moving to the west above them as they moved slowly along the gravel road. A special light filtered down through the trees and fell across the road in an on-again, off-again pattern. Carl felt as though he was weaving in and out of light and trees like a great silver needle in a tapestry.

This was a thought that comforted him. He felt a part of his world and a sense of peace in how he had lived his life. Today he wondered as he drove the mountain road if he'd ever see the whole pattern or if he was so close to it that he couldn't stand back far enough to clearly see the whole image.

Marge called his attention to a doe standing perfectly still at the edge of the timber just beyond a band of wildflowers. He slowed down and he and Marge exchanged a smile.

He did not feel his usual sense of frustration with the Indians as he drove through the quiet Ski Resort. They had finally gotten smart or taken some good advice and sold the damn thing to a group of investors from town. Now it was run efficiently. Carl had been offered a piece of the package but had decided to leave his money in the market. He had a healthy respect for the tricks the weather could

play and realized snow could or could not fall, it was all beyond his control.

He glanced at his watch. Damn, he thought, just about sunset. The stretch of road leading into Rocky Boy was wide open and the sun could be miserable this time of day. They shouldn´t have stopped so long at Kiwanis. Their bladders would have never made the three-hour trip, not on these roads, so there was nothing to do but pull down the visors and hope for some cloud cover.

A calf bawled off in the trees and the deeper answer from its mother sounded from the high plain beyond the trees. Carl wondered aloud if the tribe had moved their herd to high ground already. Marge didn´t answer but went on with her ideas about visiting the grandchildren in August instead of June. Carl half listened to her as he squinted into the setting sun´s glare.

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The herd wasn´t as far as Gus had estimated. When he came out of the trees with the calves the plain was dotted with black and brown shapes slowly grazing in the late afternoon sun. He watched as the calves took off and then nuzzled their mothers when they found them. He turned to go back to his car. He´d call around tonight and see who

was going to be up here in the morning. He´d suggest coming on horses until the calves settled down.

He was tired. He´d eaten too much and the whiskey wasn´t helping any. He sat down on a rotting stump and smoked a cigarette. Jesus, that priest. There must have been five or more of them over the years. He´d lost track of their names, just called them "the priest." All the same, earnest, never understanding anything, working with the women and children and avoiding the hard eyes of the men.

A cow bellowed and then it was quiet. Gus could hear the needles in the pines above his head. They whispered to him. Beyond the trees he could hear the water trickling down from the snowmelt to join the creek. Overhead two hawks circled and caught a down draft. The grass at his feet shifted slightly in the breeze. Gus sat and waited. There were times, times like this when he could hear the earth slowly turning. It was a soft sound, whirring, like a high-pitched song. When the sound came to him he sang along with it.

The whiskey was at war with the green onions in his stomach and he groaned as he stood up. The wind had shifted and it was cooling off fast. He could smell the cottonwoods and the damp, dark scent from the creek as he headed towards the woods. He shifted his gun belt, farted

and felt a bit of relief; the battle in his belly would be going on all night.

The crash, the sound of metal smashing into metal, hard, then the shattering of glass, and the thousands of pieces landing on the packed, gravel road snapped Gus into an upright stance.

He looked back at the cows, surprised to see them standing so quietly in the tall grass. Then he ran, his way blocked by hanging branches. He was more than a quarter mile from the road but August Windy Boy could see the dead bodies clearly.